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ABSTRACT

This digest presents an overview of the factors that influence the education of immigrant children in New York (New York), concentrating on students' needs, aspirations, and attainment, and the public policy directed at them. Massive numbers of immigrants have come to New York City, and it is estimated that about 320,000 immigrant children attended city schools in 1995-96. The number of limited English speaking children has risen sharply, and the lack of English language skills is a major stumbling block for many immigrant children. Low socioeconomic status is another reason many do not do well in school, since parental and financial support can be reduced. Recent immigrants are highly motivated to attend and succeed in school, but those who have been in the United States for a while tend to have higher dropout rates. Federal and state funding targeting immigrant children is limited, although immigrant children can benefit from programs under Titles VII and I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Improvement Act and its successors. New York has seven schools for immigrants, and more are planned. A shortage of qualified bilingual teachers in New York City continues to be a problem. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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THE EDUCATION OF IMMIGRANT CHILDREN IN NEW YORK CITY

Nearly one third of the total student population in New York City schools are immigrants, and the proportion is rising steadily. This digest presents an overview of all the factors that influence the education of immigrant children, concentrating on the students' needs, aspirations, and attainment, and on the public policies directed at them.

Demographics

The number of immigrants recently flocking to New York City has been massive. Between 1980 and 1990 about one million people from over 160 countries moved to the City. Now, over one-third of the City's population is comprised of immigrants (New York City Department of Planning, 1992).

For the purpose of securing aid, the City Board of Education takes an annual Federal Emergency Immigrant Education Census, counting children attending a school for three years or less whose total immigrant enrollment is at least three percent of its total enrollment. In the 1995-96 school year, the Census identified nearly 135,000 students—almost four times the number counted only five years before (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1996). These students represent only a portion of the total number of immigrants in New York City schools. In fact, using statistics from the 1990 U.S. Census of the Population, it is estimated that about 320,000 immigrant children attended City schools in 1995-96.

Linguistic Diversity and Education of Immigrant Children

As a result of immigration, the number of Limited English Proficient (LEP) students in City schools has risen sharply, to about 180,000 in Fall 1994. The Board of Education identifies LEP students by administering a Language Assessment Battery (LAB), which tests a student's English proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Through Federal and state legislation, LEP students are entitled to participate in an English as a Second Language (ESL) program. In addition, LEP students in schools where there are 20 or more students in the same grade with the same language are assigned to bilingual education programs, which include ESL and also native language communication arts instruction.

Educational Attainment and Achievement of Immigrant Children

Lack of English language skills is a major stumbling block in the adjustment of many immigrant children to their new schools, affecting their reading comprehension

test scores especially, but also other test scores. For example, in 1992, only 13 percent of LEP students, compared with 56 percent of all students, achieved at the 50th percentile or higher on the standardized Degrees of Reading Power test. The difference between the scores in the ninth grade Regents mathematics test of LEP students and students overall was not as great—40 percent of LEP students and 53 percent of all students passed (Board of Education, 1994).

Another reason why immigrants do not achieve in school is their lower socioeconomic status, which affects the financial and parental support that children have at home, and which is a proven factor in academic performance (Coleman, 1987). More advantaged students have educational supports such as encyclopedias and personal computers. They are also likely to have better educated parents who can help them with homework, and can set an example of academic achievement.

Immigrant students in general have higher dropout rates than the native-born. Here, again, English language proficiency plays an important role. For example, a 1994 U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO) study found that the dropout rate of Hispanic immigrants was 49 percent for those who did not speak English well, but only 12 percent for those who spoke it very well.

Attitudes and Motivation of Immigrant Students

Newer immigrant children are highly motivated to attend and succeed at school, while more acculturated immigrants and the offspring of immigrants have higher dropout rates (see, for example, Suarez-Orozco, 1995, for a study of Mexican American adolescents in the U.S.). There are two major hypotheses for the discrepancy. The first is that immigrants in general are a highly motivated population that uses education for upward mobility (McDonnell & Hill, 1993). The second hypothesis considers the comparison between immigrants and U.S. born minorities who share the same low economic status and English proficiency (Ogbu, 1991; Solomon, 1992). According to this view, immigrant children perform above "involuntary minority" children, because the latter experience a historically-rooted discriminatory treatment in both society and educational institutions.

A random survey in four heavily immigrant schools, covering students' desire to be in school, interest and attentiveness in class, and belief that they were learning a lot, indicated that immigrants are more motivated than other students.

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Policies and Programs to Promote Immigrant Student Achievement

Public Support

Federal and state funding specifically targeted to the education of immigrant children is quite limited. The major Federal program is the Emergency Immigrant Education Act. Immigrants can also benefit from the substantial Federal and state legislation targeting LEP children or children from low-income families. An example is Title VII of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which awards funds for promising programs for LEP students. Title I of that Act funds educational services to poor children. In 1995 the New York City public school system received \$376 million in Title I funds, and much of it was used to provide bilingual and general educational services to immigrant children.

There are also some programs financed by state and local educational agencies that affect immigrant children. Paradoxically, the most important of these were forced on districts by litigation in Federal courts. For example, in 1974, in what is called the Lau Decision, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that schools receiving Federal funds could not discriminate against LEP students by denying them special instructional programs that would allow their full participation in school while they were learning English.

School Programs

Students who receive language services may face problems because of their identification and separation as LEP students. In order for students to escape the stigma of LEP classes, to have equal access to the services available to students in mainstream programs, and to get an advanced level education, they must leave the special bilingual track. Unfortunately, however, many students are not monitored and tested frequently, and they languish there. In fact, only seven percent of students entering bilingual classes in the sixth grade test out within three years, and many students who enter them in junior or senior high school never do so (Dillon, 1994). Logically, programs for immigrant students must be intensive and transitional in nature, and avoid the "dumbing down" tracking implicit in multi-year programs.

Newcomer Schools

There are currently seven schools for immigrants in New York City and more are planned. All restrict admission to recent immigrants with limited English proficiency. Evidence suggests that their students will best be served if the schools closely follow the mainstream curriculum and work toward moving them into regular schools as quickly as possible (see the survey by Glenn, 1992).

Staff

There is a serious shortage of qualified bilingual teachers in New York City, partly as a result of the rapid enrollment growth of LEP students. In some City schools, teachers face students from as many as 45 different countries who use almost as many languages. The staff needed to sustain effective programs and maintain good student-to-teacher ratios is growing rapidly, so a sizable effort must be made to recruit and retain more bilingual teachers (Board of Education, 1991).

— Francisco Rivera-Batiz

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